2020 AVMA IMMEDIATE PAST PRESIDENT SPEECH

Colleagues and Friends,
Thanks for your attention today.

I suppose that I am grateful not to stand before all of you in person because we all need to be vigilant in staying healthy as our world has changed due to a novel coronavirus, COVID-19, but also because I would fear becoming too emotional as I say goodbye to so many of you and to almost 22 years of continuous active AVMA service.

What can I say to all of you today by virtual means as I prepare to move on to the next chapter in my life and whatever lies ahead? While I would have preferred to greet you all in person and enjoy the collegiality and camaraderie that is part of every HOD session and our annual conventions, this will have to do for now.

Where do I begin? Twenty-two annual meetings over the years have seemingly flown by. I have had the honor and the pleasure of working with so many dedicated and talented individuals in the volunteer ranks and also on staff that have collectively done what we all could do for our members and our profession. There have been numerous mentors and the development of lifelong friendships. I am so immensely grateful to all of them and all of you for this incredible lifetime experience in service.

Most importantly, I am grateful to my wife and two sons who gave me the freedom to do what I have done in the AVMA. Their love and support have always sustained me. Occasionally they accompanied me to meetings and conventions, at other times they did not.

My first meeting was in New Orleans in 1999. In 2001, the convention came to Boston and I was elected to the HAC where I served for 8 years and as chair 2005-2006. That year was significant in the adoption of our new Bylaws revision which was ratified at the Hawaii meeting. I remained in the HOD until 2010 when I became the District 1 director. I was proud to serve as Chair in 2015-2016. Today I end my active service in leadership in a shortened year brought about by the pandemic we are all living with. Luckily, I can continue to fulfill my passion for our profession since recently being elected as Treasurer of the WSAVA and being appointed as Chair of the WVA Ad Hoc Committee on Constitution, Bylaws, and Governance. Perhaps, there may be other AVMA positions where I can serve in the future. Time will tell.

I learned a long time ago that the best one can do is to leave things better than they found them. I hope that I have done so. I have seen the AVMA undergo a lot of change. Most of the change has been for the better but a lot of challenges face our association and our profession today. I urge you to see any challenge as an opportunity and to make positive change. I am confident that the AVMA will continue to be the exceptional organization that it has always been leading the profession.
As I prepare to move on, there are several issues that I would like to address today. Veterinary medicine has changed a great deal since I graduated from Tufts 35 years ago. We are still and always will be the noblest of professions with a profound impact on the world we live in. The issues that I would like to discuss are both external and internal. Working together the AVMA volunteers and leaders can invariably overcome anything.

We continue to be challenged at having the world and the public see veterinary medicine for all that we do, especially in the realm of one health. We have made huge strides in increasing our visibility and we cannot, for a moment, let up on our efforts in our marketing and communications efforts. My goal was to make the acronym AVMA as well known as the AMA, ADA, and ABA. I’m not convinced that we have gotten quite to that point, but we are in a better position than when I became President Elect in 2017.

Our advocacy efforts in Washington DC and at the states’ level must continue presenting the logical voice of veterinary medicine to those that need to be informed. Food safety, food animal production, epidemiology and public health, research and education, animal welfare and the human animal bond – these are the areas that we need to continue to be involved in and to be sure, to let the rest of the world know that we are the experts when it comes to these topics. Let us never abdicate control of these areas that veterinary medicine is critical to. Since we are a small profession, we need to stay unified in presenting our value to society.

Corporatization and consolidation have evolved for many reasons. Inevitably, they are largely focused on the bottom line. I fear a bit of a loss of the human side of veterinary medicine as was written about years ago in JAVMA. Huge student debt puts many in a position where they choose not to own a practice, yet history has proven that the greatest way to financial security in the profession is through practice ownership. Who will own the small 1-2 doctor practices in the future? If recent graduates do not take these over will they become obsolete? Will there continue to be a migration to urban and suburban practice leading to the slow elimination of rural practice? How can we make small and rural practice attractive to new veterinarians? How do we attract the best and the brightest to work in veterinary medicine in these areas? While we have made, and continue to make, great strides in better incomes for veterinarians, we have a long way to go still.

We are faced with the struggle of shortages in the profession, issues of diversity and inclusion, and now a lack of gender balance, opposite of what we knew for too long in veterinary medicine. It is no more correct to be 85% female than it was to be 85% male. We are beginning to have honest discussions about this topic, and we need to tackle this head on.

The AVMF, the PAC, and the Trust have all undergone recent revisions and I am optimistically looking to see what they can do in the near future for all of our membership!

Internally, I am troubled by the never-ending issues that have been around during my entire 22 years of service. There is always the challenge of responsibility between the HOD and the BOD
and that continues due to our structure. There are always politics that cloud our goodwill from time to time. Lastly, I have observed a transition from older more experienced veterinarians in leadership to youthful enthusiasm that, while lacking in experience, is raring to go. I hope that a healthy balance is found going forward allowing for all voices to be heard so that our members have the very best we can give them. With our staff so incredibly able and dedicated and a vibrant volunteer base, we can continue to be great! Let’s provide leadership opportunities to all so that nobody feels left out. To that subject, let me say this.

I am concerned at what I see and hear as I look around me as a proud American and as a proud AVMA member veterinarian. I see frustration, anger, protests, and more. There is much more to be done to make this world a better, kinder, and gentler one but we all must maintain tolerance as well. I cannot think of any country in world history that has ever been more diligent in working towards equality and civil rights, and fought against racism, sexism, and all forms of discrimination. Can you? As I look at our own organization, I see an evolved AVMA. In 2000, the Board had 1-2 women with no discernable ethnicity or demographic difference and the HOD was still primarily male. In 2020, the Board is basically half female and represented ethnicities include Black, Hispanic, Asian. The HOD is also half female. There is diversity, equity, and inclusion. Today’s actions have set in motion our work to address this issue even more and let us work to attract a more diverse population to the applicant school and those that go on to study and become veterinarians. Let us assume goodwill and not negativity, unless one categorically knows otherwise.

I say this from my heart and from my mind. Do not let politics divide us. Let veterinary medicine unite us!

Our BOD learned years ago that we cannot be everything to everybody and the strategic management process that we now work through is far more efficient and logical than the way in which we used to do business.

In closing, serving this organization and this profession has been the greatest honor of my life next to marrying my wife and partner, Carole Lee, and the birth of my two sons, Jack and Sam. I will leave you with two anecdotes. My mother told me when I was sixteen that I would never be rich by becoming a veterinarian. I believe that I have done reasonably well in that regard but in all truth, the riches I received from this great profession were not monetary and they have made me a rich man beyond my wildest dreams. Many years ago, my state VMA president had to resign his office due to pancreatic cancer and imminent death. His parting words in our VMA newsletter was to always make time for what is most important in life. Don’t miss the kids’ baseball games or ballet recitals to see one more patient on a Saturday. Don’t stay at work late so often that you don’t make time for your spouse or significant other. Take the time for your own wellness and the love of your family and friends. The person who wrote that was named Christopher Dillman and I coined his words, the Dillman Doctrine. As I leave today, I gladly go back to the loves of my life cherishing the humbling honor I have had to work with all of you these past 22 years. I look forward to the times when we meet again. Thank you and God bless you!